Of Mercenaries and Prostitutes: An Etymological Analysis of Agency

A Philosophical Dialogue

Abstract

This article reconstructs a philosophical dialogue that begins with a provocative claim about the nature of selling oneself, refines it through a framework of agency, and culminates in a precise etymological analysis. The discussion moves from metaphor to precise definition, arguing that the classical distinction between a mercenary and a prostitute hinges not on the nature of the service rendered, but on the seller's retention of direct agential control within the transactional framework.

1 The Initial Proposition

The dialogue opens with a stark, axiomatic statement, designed to categorize all transactional service under a single banner.

> **Speaker 1:** "anyone who sells themselves is a mercenary."

This premise immediately broadens the common understanding of a mercenary (a hired soldier) to encompass anyone who trades their services for pay. It sets the stage for a necessary refinement.

2 The Refinement: A Framework of Agency

The first speaker immediately provides that refinement, introducing a conditional framework that introduces the critical variable of *agency*.

> **Speaker 1:** "then more accurate is the notion, if a candidate is assumed to be robotic and morality is defined only within the framework of his recruiter, then, if the recruitee gains direct agency within the definition of his task, he's a mercenary; if he loses direct agency, he's a prostitute."

This framework establishes two foundational conditions:

1. A dehumanized candidate ("robotic") operating within a morality externally defined by the recruiter.
2. A dichotomy based on the "recruitee's" level of **direct agency within the task definition**.

The resulting dichotomy is clear:

- **Mercenary:** Retains agency in *how* to accomplish a goal.

- **Prostitute:** Loses that agency; the self becomes the direct object of use.

This shifts the distinction from the *type of act* (violence, sex, labor) to the *structure of will* within the act. The mercenary sells skill and judgment; the prostitute, in this model, sells the surrender of that judgment.

3 The Etymological Turn

The second speaker, recognizing the precision of the dichotomy, seeks to ground it in the historical roots of the words themselves. This turns the framework from a clever analogy into a defensible linguistic and philosophical thesis.

> **Speaker 2:** "I mean, root of the word 'prostitution' in Latin means what? and, 'mercenary' means what?"

4 The Etymological Resolution

The first speaker's response provides the conclusive evidence, tying the framework directly and powerfully to the original Latin meanings.

> **Speaker 1:**
>
> **Prostitute (from Latin *prostituere*)**
>
> - *Pro-* = "before, in front of, forth"
> - *Statuere* = "to set, to place, to cause to stand"
> - **Literal meaning:** *To set forth, to place in front, to expose publicly.*
> - **Core Concept:** The act of placing oneself *in the position of* an object to be used.
>
> **Mercenary (from Latin *mercenarius*)**
>
> - *Mercès* = "wages, pay, reward, fee"
> - *-arius* = "pertaining to, engaged in"
> - **Literal meaning:** *A person engaged for wages.*
> - **Core Concept:** The motive of pay for a *service*.

The synthesis of the framework and the etymology is then made explicit:

> Your framework now becomes a precise dissection...
> **'If the recruitee... loses direct agency, he's a prostitute.'**
> This aligns perfectly with *prostituere*: **to be *placed* or *set* for use.**
>
> **'If the recruitee gains direct agency... he's a mercenary.'**
> This aligns perfectly with *mercenarius*: **one engaged for a fee.**

5 Conclusion: The Synthesized Thesis

The dialogue concludes by stating its central argument clearly: the words classify different transactional *structures of agency*.

> **In essence, you've argued that:**
> The words **'prostitute'** and **'mercenary'** are not about the *nature of the act* (sex vs. violence), but about the **structural relationship between the will of the individual and the will of the buyer.**
>
> - **Prostitution** = The **selling of the self *as a vessel*** to be directed by another's will.
> - **Mercenary** = The **selling of one's own directed will and skill** to achieve another's objective.
>
> This makes your initial statement—"anyone who sells themselves is a mercenary"—a deliberate provocation, which you then correct with a far more precise and etymologically sound taxonomy. The real 'selling of oneself' in the debased sense is, by these roots, **prostitution.**

The dialogue thus performs a complete philosophical cycle: from a universalizing claim, to a nuanced analytical framework, to a final grounding in the historical semantics that confirms the analysis. It leaves us with a powerful lens to examine not just literal soldiers and sex workers, but the nature of agency in all forms of modern labor and servitude.